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Timurid Accounts of Ascension (*miʿrāj*) in *Türkī*

One Prophet, Two Models

Marc Toutant

About three years after his accession to power in the province of Fars (which included the towns of Shiraz, Yazd and Isfahan), where he reigned from 1409 to 1414, Iskandar Sulṭān, grandson of Tamerlane, prepared a questionnaire touching on various theological points and sent it to the Sufi shaykh Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī Kirmānī (d. 1431) and the theologian Sayyid Sharīf Jurjānī (d. 1413–14). Several of the queries it contained related to the celestial ascension of the Prophet: had the *miʿrāj* taken place in the physical sense? What was the nature of Burāq, the Prophet's winged mount who was half donkey and half mule? Why did Burāq and the angel Gabriel stay behind when Muḥammad had reached the highest sphere? The Timurid prince also asked about Heaven and Hell, and about the rewards and punishments that awaited human beings in the next world. At the end of his questionnaire, Iskandar Sulṭān asserted that he desired clear answers. He felt that although these subjects had very often been discussed, the theologians (*ʿulamāʾ*) analysing them had never managed to come to any agreement.[1] The Prophet's journey into the spheres of the next world interested him a great deal, and in 1410 he may have asked his court panegyrist of the period, Mīr Ḥaydar, to compose a version of this story.[2] This text has not survived, but if it was indeed written then the question arises of its possible influence on a *Miʿrājnāma*, composed in 1436 in Eastern Turkish (*Türkī*) at the court of Tamerlane's heir, Shāhrukh (r. 1405–47).[3] The many miniatures that illustrate this text, and the Uighur script in which it was transcribed, have for a long time interested orientalists and scholars: Christiane Gruber is one distinguished example. Her research reveals that accounts of ascension remained a favourite theme and source of inspiration for the poets

1 Aubin, "Le mécénat timouride à Chiraz" 71–88; Binbaş, "Timurid experimentation with eschatological absolutism: Mīrzā Iskandar, Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī, and Sayyid Sharīf Jurjānī in 815/1412", 277–303.

2 Gruber, *The Timurid 'Book of Ascension'* (Miʿrājnāma)*: A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context*, 262–65.

3 Gruber, *The Timurid 'Book of Ascension'* (Miʿrājnāma)*: A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context*, 264–65.

and painters of the princely courts from the second half of the fifteenth century until the fall of the dynasty at the beginning of the following century.[4]

Why did Tamerlane's heirs take so much care to ensure the diffusion of accounts of this episode in the Prophet's career? Why was it important for them that the account of ascension be written in Eastern Turkish (Chagatay), their mother tongue, instead of in Persian, still the pre-eminent written language? This linguistic dimension is especially significant because the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* was not copied out in the Arabic characters that were traditionally used to transcribe the Turkish language, but used instead the Uighur script that was bound to remind readers of the links between this dynasty and the empire of Genghis Khan.[5] In addition to these formal elements, the account itself differs in certain details from its Persian- and Arabic-language predecessors; this implies that for its audience it came to fulfil a specific purpose. For example, one of the elements that sets this version apart from its models is the way in which Hell is painted in particularly bright colours and vivid detail. The carefully-presented tortures inflicted upon sinners, which the reader or spectator of this manuscript discovers through the Prophet's own eyes as he witnesses them, indicate to the believer what awaits him in the next world if he goes against religious law (at least as it is conceived by the prince on earth). This illustrated paraenesis, which looks like a soteriological guide, may also be linked to the religious politics of a sovereign who wants, despite his Turco-Mongolian origins, to appear here as a renewer of the Prophet's religion. We shall return to this subject later in this chapter.

Half a century later, a series of poems that looked at the ascension in a completely different way was written at the court of another Timurid prince. Their author was the great polymath Mīr ʿAlī Shīr Nawāʾī (1441–1501), who was then perceived as the most influential figure in the cultural life of Herat. These *miʿrājiyya*s appear in the prologues to each of the five narrative poems of the *mathnawī* type that make up his *Khamsa*, also written in Eastern Turkish between 1483 and 1485 and dedicated to Sulṭān Ḥusayn, the last great sovereign of the dynasty, who reigned from 1469 to 1506. Here Hell is no longer at issue, nor indeed is Heaven, because the entire story is centred on the mystical union between the Prophet and his Creator: Muḥammad's marvellous voyage becomes an allegory for the path that the Sufi is called upon to follow in his quest for God. Nawāʾī's texts belong to the Persian lyrical tradition in

4 Gruber, "L'ascension (*Miʿrāj*) du prophète Mohammad dans la peinture et la littérature islamiques", 55–79.

5 The Uighur script was adopted for administrative purposes by the Mongols during the thirteenth century.

which authors since Sanāʾī (who died around 1131) had inserted *miʿrāj* within the preambles of their narrative poems, omitting from the *miʿrāj* certain episodes, such as the visits to Heaven and Hell, in order to concentrate on the process of spiritual initiation.[6] Although the links between these accounts of ascension and the narratives they precede are merely allegorical, contemporary readers were far from considering the *miʿrāj* to be secondary, as is demonstrated by the fact that these are among the few episodes thought worthy of being illustrated with miniatures.[7]

The *Miʿrājnāma* written at the court of Shāhrukh in 1436 and the five *miʿrājiyya*s composed by Nawāʾī from 1483 to 1485 make up the principal corpus accessible to today's scholars of Timurid accounts of ascension in Eastern Turkish.[8] Alongside these Turkic versions there are accounts in Persian.[9] We have chosen not to include these in the current study in order to explore the singularity embodied in the choice of a Turkic language as a means of composition. It is certain that the use of this idiom in this specific dynastic context bound each work even more closely to the prince for whom it was created. The importance of these texts is also underlined by the fact that both the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* and Nawāʾī's five poems were widely diffused, well beyond the frontiers of Timurid domains.[10]

An examination of the specifics of the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* and of Nawāʾī's *miʿrājiyya*s, and of the tradition to which each belongs, along with a comparison between the two texts, will allow us to answer the following questions: How did the Timurids appropriate this fundamental event in the career of the Prophet? What image of Muḥammad is offered in these two types of text? What example does the Prophetic figure come to represent to the audiences of these widely-diffused accounts?

1 Two Timurid Versions of the *Miʿrāj*

The prose text of 1436 has been the object of several studies, foremost among which is the work of Christiane Gruber that we have already mentioned, and

6 Mayel-Heravi [1996], 199–203.

7 Gruber, "L'ascension (*Miʿrāj*) du prophète Mohammad dans la peinture et la littérature islamiques", 71.

8 Gruber, *The Timurid 'Book of Ascension'* (Miʿrājnāma)*: A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context*, 330–336.

9 For example, see Felek, "Reading the *Miʿrāj* Account as a Theatrical Performance: The Case of *Maʿārij al-Nubuwwa*".

10 Pavet de Courteille, *Mirâdj-Nâmeh*, I–XVI; Toutant, *Un empire de mots*, 34.

to which we refer the reader who would like to know more about aspects that we do not discuss here. The poems of Nawā'ī have not yet been translated, nor have they been commented upon in any other way, so we will examine these in greater depth.

1.1 *The 1436 Miʿrājnāma*

A comparison between the 1436 manuscript and the 1511 copy that is conserved in Istanbul[11] brings out the specificities of the appearance of the original text, which was probably commissioned by Shāhrukh. The Istanbul manuscript is written in Arabic characters, which were traditionally used for the re-transcription of Eastern Turkish, whereas the original *Miʿrājnāma* uses a late Uighur script,[12] and is among a number of texts copied in this alphabet over a period of about fifteen years during Shāhrukh's reign.[13] The original contains about sixty miniature illustrations, while the Istanbul manuscript has none. Almost every folio of the original contains a miniature, and a few have two;[14] they often take up more space than the text. The importance of the visual here indicates a desire to stir the public, who thus become spectators as much as readers or listeners.

The author, who remains unknown to us, affirms in his introduction that the work is a translation of the *Nahj al-farādīs* (The Path to Paradises), a Persian text composed around 1358 in forty sections, each of which starts with one of the Prophet's sayings. The author of the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* was inspired specifically by the sections of the *Nahj al-farādīs* dealing with the ascension and the visits to Heaven and to Hell.[15] As was often the case during this period, the text is not so much a translation as an adaptation. Like the *Nahj al-farādīs*, the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* begins with a *ḥadīth*, on which it relies to attest to the truth it relays. The author himself indicates that this *ḥadīth*, almost identical in the two texts, comes from the *Maṣābīḥ al-sunna*, by Baghawī.[16] Thus the Timurid *Miʿrājnāma* presents itself as part of the *Ḥadīth* literature. It is a narrative amplification of one of the Prophet's sayings. Because of this, the narration is in the first person: the Prophet is describing events that he has witnessed

11 Eckmann, "Die kiptschakische Literatur" 292; Scherberger, *Das Miʿrāǧnāme*, 36–38.

12 Deny, "Un Soyurgal du timouride Šahruḫ en écriture ouigoure", 254.

13 Sertkaya, *Islâm devrenin uygur harfli eserlerine toplu bir bakış*; Clauson, "The Muhabbatnāma of Xwārazmī", 243; DeWeese, "The Predecessors of Navā'ī in the Funūn al balāghah of Shaykh Aḥmad b. Khudāydād Ṭarāzī", 87–88.

14 Masuya, "The Miʿrādj-nāma reconsidered", 40, 52.

15 Tezcan and Zülfikar, *Nehcü'l-ferādīs*, 38–50.

16 Supplément turc 190, fol. 1 v.

and people he has met; the author sometimes interrupts these descriptions to provide translations and clarifications.

Thus, Muḥammad says that the angel Gabriel appeared to him one night, accompanied by an animal that was saddled and bridled and answered to the name of Burāq. Mounted on this creature, the Prophet undertakes a nocturnal journey, going first to Jerusalem where he meets all of his predecessors from Adam to Jesus. Because he is the seal of the prophets, it is natural for him to lead their prayers. His superiority is explicitly affirmed by Abraham's recognition of his pre-eminent rank. Here begins the ascension itself. Muḥammad reaches the celestial spheres along a ladder of light (*miʿrāj*). A door guarded by an angel restricts entrance to the first heaven. Gabriel knocks on this door, and when the angel learns that he is accompanied by the Prophet he hails and admits them. Similar scenes take place when the Prophet is admitted to the other celestial regions, to paradise and to Hell.

Each of the celestial spheres is described, and each is composed of its own unique substance. Such descriptions are absent from the *Nahj al-farādīs*, and from Rabghūzī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, which was also composed in Eastern Turkish (around 1310), and contains one section devoted to the *miʿrāj*.[17] This aspect of the text recalls the version attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, in which each celestial sphere has a specific name and is described according to its constituent element.[18] Most importantly, the attention the author pays to these details reveals that his aim is to give readers a concrete impression of the hereafter.

Gabriel and Muḥammad meet thousands of angels in the celestial spheres, some of whom are extraordinary to look at. One is a being whose body is half fire and half ice; another has sixty-six heads and as many tongues. The inclusion of these figures is significant, because they do not appear in the *Nahj al-farādīs*. In this Timurid version Gabriel and Muḥammad move through a topography of marvels, witnessing the many strange phenomena that animate it, such as gigantic oceans floating in the sky.

When the Prophet reaches the highest sphere, the celebrated episode of his meeting with God takes place. Muḥammad is now travelling alone, for this privilege is reserved for him only. He asks that the sins of his community be absolved. Following the advice of Moses, he also negotiates the number of prayers to be required daily, succeeding in reducing it from God's initial fifty down to five. In this account there is a genuine dialogue between God and His creature; the text informs us that God uttered no fewer than ninety thousand words. It is worth remarking that the author divides these into three parts in a

17 Al-Rabghūzī, *The Stories of the Prophets*, 538–563.
18 Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey*.

way that is influenced by mystical terminology. The Prophet relates that thirty thousand among God's words concern the *sharīʿa* (law), thirty thousand the *ṭarīqat* (path), and thirty thousand the *ḥaqīqat* (truth). The text further specifies that whereas God commands him to speak to everyone about the religious law, and to evoke the initiatic path only to those whom he will choose, the Truth is different, and he must keep it completely secret. It's clear that these allusions to mysticism are intended to reaffirm the primary importance for the whole community of the religious literalism of the *sharīʿa*, while restricting the Sufi mystical experience to just a few individuals chosen by the Prophet.

These divine instructions, which seem to be specific to the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma*, since they do not occur in any subsequent text, bring the meeting between God and Muḥammad to a close. The author follows this with his explanation of how the Prophet was able to visit Heaven and Hell, citing a *ḥadīth* from Baghawī's account that reminds the reader that it is earthly conduct that determines the soul's salvation:

> Paradise is conquered through difficult works. One must fast, pray, undertake pilgrimage and holy war, submit to spiritual exercises and follow the practices of religion in the most punctilious way. Hell must also be won, through the demands of the ego and all sorts of desires.[19]

The description of Heaven in this *Miʿrājnāma*, though brief, contains a few interesting details (the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* does not describe paradise). Here the text tells us that birds sometimes come to rest on the heads of women described as wondrously beautiful, some of them picking flowers and others riding camels. The Prophet even converses with a few of these women, who ask him to find them husbands. However, it is on the description of Hell that the most care has been lavished. Fifteen forms of punishment are enumerated, where the *Nahj al-farādīs* had mentioned only nine. To those already mentioned in this model, the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* adds punishments for stealing from orphans, for the refusal of alms, and for the consumption of wine. Each torture is described according to the grounds on which it is inflicted. Here are wine-drinkers who died without repenting:

> I also saw several people who had chains around their necks. Angels were pouring poison down their throats and violently tormenting them. I asked who these people were. Gabriel replied that they had drunk wine and then died without having repented.[20]

19 *Miʿrājnāma*, MS Paris, BN, Suppl. turc 190, fol. 44v.
20 *Miʿrājnāma*, MS Paris, BN, Suppl. turc 190, fol. 65v.

FIGURE 15.1 The fate reserved for wine-drinkers according to the BNF manuscript, Supplément turc 190, fol. 65 v

This particularly detailed vision of Hell is illustrated with three times more miniatures than illustrate the vision of paradise. One of the work's principal aims is evidently to shock and frighten readers by displaying the fate reserved for believers who fail to live as they should. In order, perhaps, to support this, the author has removed a doctrinal explanation of the nature of the Prophet's vision during his encounter with God; in the *Nahj al-farādīs* this episode is placed just before the description of Hell.[21] There it dealt with the representation of God and the ways in which scholars (*'ulamā'*) had interpreted Muḥammad's vision, on the basis of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*s. Here the author of the 1436 *Mi'rājnāma*, in order to maintain the dramatic momentum of his narrative, choses to ignore a debate that was crucial at the time, opposing the 'vision of the heart' to the 'vision of the eyes'.[22] In any case, when one comes face to face with the evocative power of the miniatures in this work it is difficult to know whether these were realised as illustrations for the words, or whether it is the text that serves as a series of extended captions for the images. The account ends with Muḥammad's visits to Mount Qāf and to the towns of Jābalsā and Jābilqā, where he meets followers of Moses and effortlessly converts them to Islam.

If this text avoids weighing itself down with reflections on the nature or authenticity of the *mi'rāj*, it is because the author has no intention of deviating from the work's main objective: above all, the viewer and listener must be persuaded of the absolute necessity of scrupulous obedience to the rules of the Prophet's religion, as expressed in its exoteric aspect. The observation of the *sharī'a* is the only method that will allow the faithful to avoid the torments of Hell, depicted here with such care and fervour. In this respect, this *Mi'rajnāma*, produced within Shāhrukh's entourage, is an eschatological guide that presents events from the point of view of the strictest religious legalism; the primary purpose of this account of the Prophet's celestial journey is to show how good and bad believers are rewarded or punished.

1.2 *The Five Mi'rājiyyas of Nawā'ī (1483–85)*

The 1436 *Mi'rājnāma* is not mentioned in any Timurid-period sources, and it is therefore not possible to be certain that Nawā'ī was aware of it. However, the work was conserved in the Sultan's library in Herat, and it is therefore very likely

21 Tezcan and Zülfikar, *Nehcü'l-ferādīs*, 44; Gruber, *The Timurid 'Book of Ascension'* (Mi'rājnāma)*: A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context*, 285.

22 In the final pages of the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* the author sums up the arguments about the authenticity of the *mi'rāj* and comes down firmly on the side of its genuine reality (Al-Rabghūzī, *The Stories of the Prophets*, 558–60).

that the Timurid poet had laid eyes upon it at some point. Nawāʾī's accounts of the Prophet's ascension include a prologue (*dibācha*) for each of the five narrative poems (*mathnawī*), which are called *Ḥayrat al-abrār* (The Perplexity of the Just) *Farhād u Shīrīn*, *Laylī u Majnūn*, *Sabʿa-yi sayyār* (The Seven Travellers), and *Sadd-i iskandarī* (The Alexandrine Wall). These *miʿrājiyya*s are based on those of the Persian poets, particularly those used by Niẓāmī Ganjawī as a preamble to his celebrated Pentalogy (*Khamsa*), written at the end of the twelfth century. Nawāʾī may also have drawn inspiration from versions by ʿAbduraḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492) and by Amīr Khusraw Dihlawī (d. 1325), who had both composed imitations of Niẓāmī's *Khamsa*.

In the prologue of *Makhzan al-asrār* (c. 1166), the first of the five narrative poems (*mathnawī*) that make up his Pentalogy, Niẓāmī presents the *miʿrāj* as a spiritual ascension whose most important aspect is the vision of God; this approach seems to have been influenced by Qushayri's *Kitāb al-miʿrāj* (written before 1072), but also, and especially, by the *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqat* of Sanāʾī (d. 1131). In this poem, Sanāʾī used a wide range of imagery to laud the Prophet's exceptional character, exalted by God to the first rank through his ascension. Above all, Sanāʾī gave shape to a new model of the *miʿrāj*, in which the account of episodes such as the visits to Heaven and Hell no longer featured.[23] The apocalyptic aspects of the *miʿrāj* were eliminated because of the new role played by this story: intended to serve as an allegory for the account that it preceded, the ascension of the Prophet took on the form of a mystical initiation. Muḥammad adopted the characteristics of an itinerant whose path took him on a cosmic journey through planets and stars before leading him to mystical union with the Creator. It was for this reason that Niẓāmī, in the prologue of his *Makhzan al-asrār*, refers to a *safar-i ʿishq* (journey of love) when speaking of the *miʿrāj*.[24]

Each of the sections (*bāb*) that make up the five *mathnawī* of Nawāʾī's *Khamsa* is preceded by a heading (*sarlawḥa*), including those relating the *miʿrāj*. The headings of the five *miʿrājiyya*s function in several ways: the first is to provide a Qurʾānic basis for the developments that are to follow. Thus, the headings of the *Ḥayrat al-abrār* and *Sadd-i iskandarī miʿrājiyya*s include passages from Suras 17 (The Night Journey) and 53 (The Star), passages on which these accounts, in part, rely.[25] The headings also inform the reader of the nature of the experiences to be related: the ascension of the Prophet is a journey that

23 Fouchécour, "The Story of the Ascension (*Mi ʿraj*) in Nizami's work", 179–188.

24 Niẓāmī Ganjawī, *Kulliyāt-i Niẓāmī Ganjawī*, 9.

25 Nawāʾī, *Khamsa*, MS Michigan, 450, 16 and 353.

goes beyond the intellect (*ʿaql*) and reason (*khirad*), and even beyond imagination (*khayāl*).[26] Finally, the heading for the *miʿrāj* of *Laylī u Majnūn* announces a major theme, that of the union between the Prophet and God; significantly, here the term *waṣl* (union) is cited twice.[27]

The accounts of the five *miʿrājiyya*s all begin with descriptions of the night of ascension. This night, intended and prepared specifically for this event, is such that any comparison could only put daylight to shame.[28] It basks in the perfume of innumerable houris, from the curls of whose loosened hair emanate the scents of musk and amber. Their faces glow like flames in the darkness – they want to captivate the Prophet with their finery. Here the poet depicts a context appropriate to the expression of desire, introducing the theme of mystical union. Meanwhile, Muḥammad is hidden in the home of his host Umm Hānī and compared to the sun yet to rise.[29] It is thanks to this surrounding darkness that the Muḥammadan light is able to shine. Nawāʾī is also telling the reader that the Prophet is the light of the world, and that the flame of the union (*waṣl shamʿi*) with God burns within him.[30] While the Prophet is resting, he is shown to be devoting all his thoughts to the well-beloved (*maḥbūb khayālī*).[31] In the *miʿrajiyya* of *Sabʿa-yi sayyār*, just before the arrival of Gabriel, one can read that:

> His heart began to boil at the thought of union
> His heart, boiling like the sea, made him cry out[32]

Thus, when the angel Gabriel descends with Burāq to visit the Prophet, it is to transmit the message, or rather the 'supplication' (*istidʿā*') of a lover (*muḥibb*), God, who is longing for His beloved (*maḥbūb-i jānī*). It was indeed God who first desired this union; Gabriel confirms this in *Ḥayrat al-abrār*:

> He says: 'O treasure of the secrets of ardent desire
> God has expressed the ardent desire that you unite with Him'[33]

26 MS Michigan 450, 536.
27 MS Michigan 450, 262.
28 MS Michigan 450, 262.
29 MS Michigan 450, 112, 263, 353 and 537.
30 MS Michigan 450, 112.
31 MS Michigan 450, 263.
32 MS Michigan 450, 16.
33 MS Michigan 450, 16.

FIGURE 15.2 Page from the manuscript of Nawā'ī's *Khamsa*, describing the beginning of the *Ḥayrat al-abrār mi'rāj*. University of Michigan – Special Collection Library, Isl. MS. 450, p. 16

The intensity of the shock is so great that Muḥammad loses consciousness, although he makes a rapid recovery. In the *Sadd-i iskandarī*, it is Gabriel who urges the Prophet (addressed as *ḥabībi*, beloved) to rise, using the mystical terminology of separation and reunion:

You must cross the expanses of separation
You must arise and make your way to union[34]

Muḥammad mounts Burāq and they take flight. Here begins the journey through the fixed stars, plunging the reader into the universe of Islamic cosmology. Muslim astrologers conceived of the universe as a series of concentric circles whose centre was the earth. In the text by Qazwīnī, *ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt wa gharāʾib al-mawjūdāt* (The marvels of creation and the strangeness of all that exists), written in the second half of the twelfth century, the earth is surrounded by a certain number of spheres (*aflāk*). The first seven of these correspond to the orbits of the planets as they were then known.[35] The moon's sphere is closest to the earth, followed by Mercury (*ʿUtārid*), Venus (*Zuhara*), the sun, Mars (*Bahrām*), Jupiter (*Mushtarī*), and Saturn (*Zuḥal*). The eighth sphere is that of the fixed stars (*al-kawākib al-thābita*), containing the twelve constellations of the zodiac. According to Qazwīnī, the 'Greatest Sphere' (*al-falak al-aʿẓam*) can be found beyond this, regulating the orbits of all other heavenly bodies, and containing the throne of God. These cosmic spheres are also the strata of a moral and eschatological universe inhabited by angels, the souls of saints and sinners, and the spirits of various prophets.[36]

The account, in the poems by Nawāʾī, of the ascension through the mobile planets shows the effect of the *miʿrāj* on these planets' behaviour. Neither the world nor the cosmos remains the same once the Prophet has passed through. This upheaval is all the more remarkable because astrology normally holds that it is the planets that have an influence over bodies and their environment. The reactions of Mercury when the Prophet reaches the second heavenly sphere are notable. This planet is often associated with the figure of the scribe (which is why it is sometimes called *Munshī* (the Scribe). Consequently, in the *miʿrājiyya* of *Farhād u Shīrīn*, when Mercury is so happy to see Burāq and his rider, he lets his papers and writing implements be blown away by the wind.[37] In *Laylī u Majnūn*, Mercury throws his ink in Saturn's face.[38] In *Sabʿa-yi sayyār* Burāq's granite hoof splits Mercury's reed pen, and in *Sadd-i iskandarī* his inkwell and reed pen spontaneously break into pieces.[39] But the Prophet's effect goes beyond Mercury's behaviour and belongings: the very nature of the planet also undergoes a profound upheaval. According to astrology, this planet

34 MS Michigan 450, 354.
35 The moon and the sun were considered to be planets (Carboni, *The 'Wonders of creation'*).
36 Carboni, *Following the Stars*, 3.
37 MS Michigan 450, 113.
38 MS Michigan 450, 263.
39 MS Michigan 450, 537 and 354.

was a hypocrite, since Mercury had no specific positive or negative influence. Here the poet affirms, in *Ḥayrat al-abrār*, that 'Mercury the scribe' was so honoured to be on the Prophet's path that he 'let go of his chameleon outlook'.[40] As for the musician of the skies, Venus, her instrument (a *daf*) is torn when the Prophet's horse reaches the third sphere.[41] In fact, when one reads these poems in the order in which they were composed, the reaction of Venus goes from joy to fright: the planet initially, in the *Ḥayrat al-abrār*, plays a joyful air and sings a congratulatory song,[42] while the *miʿrājiyya* of *Laylī u Majnūn* tells the reader that Venus plays more quietly when she sees the Prophet arrive.[43] The account in the *Sabʿa-yi sayyār* says that fear drives Venus to hide her harp,[44] and the *Sadd-i iskandarī* has the planet hiding inside a tent in order to sing from there.[45] The reaction of the planet Mars (*Bahrām*), in the fifth heavenly sphere, also demonstrates the effect on the universe produced by the *miʿrāj*. The negative influence and effects of this planet were considered second only to those exercised by Saturn, which is why it was sometimes called *al-naḥs al-aṣghar* (the minor misfortune), while Saturn was referred to as *al-naḥs al-akbar* (the larger misfortune). In *Farhād u Shīrīn*, when the Prophet passes through the fifth sphere Mars becomes *saʿd-i akbar* (the most fortunate), receiving the nickname generally given to Jupiter, the planet reputed to have the most beneficial effects.[46] But more often the poet indicates that the reaction of Mars is to return his sword to its sheath: the planet stops spilling blood and puts himself in the service of the Prophet.[47] When Muḥammad arrives in the sixth heavenly sphere Jupiter's happiness (*saʿādat iktisābi*) increases;[48] when he reaches the next sphere all the miseries of Saturn are erased and fortune (*saʿādat*) becomes his slave.[49]

The Prophet's ascension continues into the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars and signs of the zodiac, and here also his presence has a positive impact on the behaviour of the stars. Nawāʾī plays with the relationship between signifier and signified and has the reactions of the signs of the zodiac accord with those of the figures (usually animals) that they represent. Thus Aries (ram)

40 MS Michigan 450, 16.
41 MS Michigan 450, 113.
42 MS Michigan 450, 16.
43 MS Michigan 450, 263.
44 MS Michigan 450, 537.
45 MS Michigan 450, 354.
46 MS Michigan 450, 113.
47 MS Michigan 450, 354 and 537.
48 MS Michigan 450, 263.
49 Because of its negative associations, astrologers associated Saturn with the colour black and said that it had control over the most remote geographical regions.

and Taurus (bull) offer themselves as sacrifices,[50] while the Gemini twins put on their belts to show that they are ready to enter into Muḥammad's service.[51] Here the text often adopts a humorous tone: the lion, Leo, symbol of power and strength, suddenly takes fright and runs away, or hides in a corner, or else becomes like a tame hunting-dog.[52] Virgo, also called *Sunbula* or *Khūsha* (the ear of wheat),[53] offers herself as fodder for Burāq,[54] like Capricorn, the nanny-goat, who gives him her best milk.[55] Scorpio finds an antidote to his own venom.[56] Sagittarius, generally represented as a centaur arming his bow, abandons his warlike pose to undertake a retreat for forty days of ascesis (*chilla*).[57] The water poured out by Aquarius (*Dalw*)[58] is transformed into a 'water of life' (*āb-i zindagānī*), in which the fish Pisces comes to live a new life, praising the man 'who will never come to death'.[59] As for Libra, the scales, they return to equilibrium thanks to the justice emanating from the Prophet.[60]

Then the Prophet arrives at the throne of God (*ʿarsh*). This level includes the entire physical universe, and is the ninth heavenly sphere, the sphere without stars.[61] Here the emblems of divine power – *ʿArsh*, *Kursī* (Steps), *Lawḥ* (Writing Tablet), and *Qalam* (Reed Pen) – all express how honoured they are by the Prophet's arrival. The poet tells us that the Throne became a crown in which Muḥammad was the pearl.[62] Burāq then continues his ascension and the Prophet crosses into the *Lā Makān* (Non-Place). In order to reach God, he must leave Burāq and Gabriel behind and continue on the *rafraf*, which embraces his feet in an expression of joyous respect.[63] Now Muḥammad rids

50 MS Michigan 450, 16, 113, 263, 354, 537.
51 MS Michigan 450, 354.
52 MS Michigan 450, 16, 263, 354 and 537.
53 The Virgin is so-called after the brightest star in this constellation, *sunbula*, 'ear of wheat'.
54 MS Michigan 450, 16 and 263.
55 MS Michigan 450, 16 and 113.
56 MS Michigan 450, 16 and 263.
57 MS Michigan 450, 16, 263 and 537.
58 *Dalw* means 'pail for drawing water'.
59 MS Michigan 450, 263 and 355.
60 MS Michigan 450, 355 and 537.
61 This is Ibn 'Arabī's conception of the ninth sphere. His thinking had a profound influence on Islamic cosmology, and on the mystical notions of Nawā'ī and of his master, Jāmī. Cf. Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabî and the Mi 'râj" (1987) 629–652, and Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabî and the Mi 'râj" (1988) 63–77.
62 MS Michigan 450, 113.
63 The term *rafraf* has been interpreted in many different ways. As Colby remarks in a footnote, in some versions of the *miʿrāj* this is taken to be the proper name of some sort of winged mount, playing a role similar to that of Burāq (Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey*, 244). It would appear that this is also Nawā'ī's interpretation.

himself of the 'clothing of existence' and puts on 'the belt of nothingness'.[64] He says goodbye to his self, and discards the dust of his selfhood. Relieved of existence (*wujūd*) and nothingness (*ʿadam*), his heart is emptied of everything, occupied by love alone. It is only now, the poet says, that he can find 'the sign of the place for which he longed'.[65] According to the traditional mystical conception of thinkers such as Ghazālī or Ibn ʿArabī, intimacy with the Divine is accompanied by a sensation of renunciation of all that is not God.[66] It is only once the Prophet has been annihilated in the divine presence that he can truly contemplate his Most-Beloved. Once he finds himself within two bow lengths (*qāba-qausayn*) of the object of his quest, he no longer has either a body or a soul.[67] The 'breeze of union' (*nasīm-i waṣl*)[68] opens the seventy thousand layers of the 'veil of the secret',[69] and the 'hand of goodwill' draws him up into the sanctuary of unicity (*ḥarīm-i waḥdat*).[70]

This moment is the peak of the mystical experience. Nothing is visible except God; nothing exists outside of God. This is where the author places the episode of the communication with the Creator. But the poet includes no dialogue – he is even careful to mention that this was not a dialogue. For Nawāʾī, to say 'them, they' would be an error, for, he affirms, duality (*ithnayniyat*) could not intervene between the Prophet and God.[71] The concept of duality becomes obsolete, there is only a 'single pure unity'.[72] The prophet becomes speaker and listener simultaneously, and because of this, when he wants to make his supplication known – the remission of the sins of the community of believers – it is from himself and to himself that the plea is delivered.[73] The poet writes that the Prophet interceded in his community's favour with God's own tongue.[74] There can therefore be no obstacle to the Prophet's requests. In fact, the text of the *Laylī u Majnūn* indicates that the more requests the Prophet expressed, the more quickly they were fulfilled, even before having been fully formulated.[75] But more important than the granting of his pleas was the fact that the Prophet

64 MS Michigan 450, 263.
65 MS Michigan 450, 113.
66 Deladrière, *Ghazâlî. Le Tabernacle des Lumières*, 9–31.
67 MS Michigan 450, 264. The distance of two bow lengths (*qāba-qausayn*) corresponds to that assigned by the Qurʾān (53: 9).
68 MS Michigan 450, 113.
69 MS Michigan 450, 537.
70 MS Michigan 450, 113.
71 MS Michigan 450, 264.
72 MS Michigan 450, 355.
73 MS Michigan 450, 264.
74 MS Michigan 450, 114.
75 MS Michigan 450, 264.

was able to reach the spiritual union he had so desired: this interview is, above all, a reunion between the lover and the beloved.

After this, Muḥammad can return to earth. He encounters Gabriel and Burāq again. All of the celestial beings are euphoric, and want to contemplate the Prophet and kiss his feet. Nawāʾī emphasises the transformation of Muḥammad. He had been a bud, now he is a rosary; he had been a particle of light, now he is a sparkling sun.[76] He has become the inherently unique one (*aḥad*).[77] The author underlines that everything the Prophet did was done for the sake of his community.[78] In *Laylī u Majnūn*, the Prophet returns with the *barāt*, 'key of deliverance', given to him by God for all sinners.[79]

The Prophet's return also provides an opportunity for Nawāʾī to come back to his more controversial points. The poet re-affirms that this really was a physical journey. In support of this, the verses of the *Ḥayrat al-abrār* say that his physical body was present throughout, because his body was all soul, 'from the head to the feet', while the verses of *Farhād u Shīrīn* explain that the Prophet's soul (*jān*) remained with God, as only his body was destined to make the return journey.[80] And, when Nawāʾī recalls the extraordinary nature of the events depicted, which lasted but an instant (*bir ān*),[81] and which the intellect (*ʿaql*) remains unable to comprehend, he chooses to imitate his Persian predecessors (notably Niẓāmī, and ʿAṭṭār) by quoting Q 53:17, 'his eye swerved not; nor swept astray', in order to demonstrate the concrete reality of what the Prophet had seen.

Nawāʾī's use of these Qurʾānic quotations, along with other elements, shows that he considers himself part of a specific tradition of Persian *miʿrājiyya*s. The thing that seems to distinguish the poems of the Timurid writer is the emphasis he places on the union, as evinced by the recurrence in his texts of the terms *waṣl* and *wiṣāl* (union). If we compare his writings with those of his various exemplars, this distinction is clear. In Nawāʾī's five *miʿrājiyya*s, the term *waṣl* occurs no fewer than thirteen times, and *wiṣāl* appears five times. In Niẓāmī's poems on the ascension, *wiṣāl* occurs just once,[82] while *waṣl* and *wiṣāl* are completely absent from the *miʿrajiyya*s of Amīr Khusraw of Delhi,[83]

76 MS Michigan 450, 17.

77 MS Michigan 450, 355.

78 MS Michigan 450, 17.

79 On the *barāt* cf. Fouchécour, "The Story of the Ascension (*Mi ʿraj*) in Nizami's work" 181.

80 MS Michigan 450, 17 and 114.

81 MS Michigan 450, 17.

82 Niẓāmī Ganjawī, *Kulliyāt-i Niẓāmī Ganjawī*, 8.

83 Cf. Amīr Khusraw Dihlawī, *Maṭlaʿ al-anwār*, 20–27; *Shīrīn u Khusraw*, 11–14; *Majnūn u Laylī*, 17–21; *Hasht bihisht*, 12–15; *Āyina-yi iskandarī*, 8–10.

and from those of Jāmī.[84] The very infrequent instances of these two terms in the Persian texts that our Timurid poet drew upon does not mean that the theme of union between God and his messenger was absent from their poems on the ascension. Jāmī, for example, writes in his *miʿrājiyya* of *Yūsuf u Zulaykhā* that just before the encounter with God the angel Esrafil built a bed of draperies around Muḥammad, resembling a nuptial chamber; this shows that Jāmī also conceived of this meeting as a union.[85] For this reason, the recurrence in Nawāʾī's writings of terms having to do with union has less to do with any originality of viewpoint, and more with his preoccupation with the pedagogical value of his work.

Thus, in the same way as the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* is distinct from its models through the importance it gives to depictions of Hell, the five 1480 *miʿrājiyya*s are singular in their insistence on the mystical theme of union; this indicates that these two types of text aimed to 'function' as 'effective narratives' (*récits efficaces*).[86] By unequivocally underlining a single principal idea, each of these authors could fulfil a didactic role at the heart of the 'educational institution' that was the court of a prince.[87] This similarity of rhetorical style does not, however, diminish the differences between the specific ideas that each aimed to put forward.

2 Two *Exempla* with Divergent Aims

The texts that make up our corpus can be placed within a fairly traditional Sunnī outlook on the event portrayed. For example, both authors begin their accounts in the home of Umm Hanī. Both follow Ṭabarī's interpretation in insisting that there was a physical and material journey, not merely one taking place within Muḥammad's heart. These are not the only common points: we have seen that each author is equally concerned with emphasising the narrative drive of the tale, to the possible detriment of its doctrinal aspects. In this respect, the sense of the marvellous plays an important role. What is particularly significant is that the use to which this sense is put is markedly different in these two texts.

84 Cf. Jāmī, *Mathnawī-yi Haft awrang*, 377–379; 584–586; 805–807; 916–918.
85 Jāmī, *Mathnawī-yi Haft awrang*, 586.
86 Berlioz, "Le récit efficace".
87 Burke, "L'homme de cour" 163.

2.1 *The Significations of the* Miʿrāj: *From Salvation to Union*

In the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* the reader discovers a bestiary that is completely absent from the five later *miʿrājiyya*s. The white cockerel whose head reaches the throne of God while its feet rest on the earth doesn't feature in those, nor are there polycephalic angels in any of Nawāʾī's five accounts, where the wondrous elements are concentrated in the descriptions of celestial bodies and their behaviour. In this respect the effect each author seeks to have on his readers is not the same. The reactions of the planets and signs of the zodiac would be likely to awaken a reader's sense of the marvellous, and perhaps make him smile. The other text, in prose, is completely different, relying as it does on a 'rhetoric of fear' (to borrow Jacques Le Goff's expression).[88] This is particularly noticeable in the description of the visit to Hell, which assumes great importance in this version. An interesting aspect of this is the fact that here the torments inflicted on the damned are known to the Prophet even before he visits them. The reader sees Muḥammad weeping on his arrival in the first sphere of Heaven, when he sees a group of sinners, whose unenviable fate already awakens his sympathy. Gabriel later tells the Prophet that the sea of fire they see in the fifth sphere will pour into Hell on the day of resurrection, there to torment the damned. In the seventh celestial sphere, the Prophet is invited by Abraham to enter a vast palace. On his way in, he notices that, of the two groups of Muslim believers he sees standing outside the edifice, only those wearing white tunics are invited to enter; those with black stripes on their clothes may not come in. And the account of the infernal regions, once the Prophet reaches them, does not spare the reader. Here he finds the angel Mālik, prince of darkness, standing in the entrance. In the centre stands the *Zaqqūm*, that gigantic tree (to walk around it would take five hundred years) whose fruits resemble the heads of demons. Next comes the description of the fifteen tortures. This detailed presentation of Hell is particularly remarkable because, as we have seen, Heaven does not receive the same treatment.[89]

In the poems of Nawāʾī the Prophet visits neither Heaven nor Hell. Hell is not even mentioned, and the existence of paradise is only evoked by allusion; for example, at the beginning of the *Sabʿa-yi sayyār miʿrājiyya* the poet writes that the Prophet 'strives to return to the lands of paradise'.[90] A scattering of mentions occurs in the other poems, in expressions such as 'a breeze

88 Le Goff, "L'*exemplum* et la rhétorique de la prédication aux XIII^{e}–XIV^{e} siècles".

89 The visit to paradise takes up two folios (49 and 51), while that to Hell is eight folios long (53, 55, 57, 59, 61, 63, 65 and 67).

90 MS Michigan 450, 536.

from paradise'[91] or 'garden of paradise',[92] when giving initial details about the specifics of the night of ascension; the expression 'angel of paradise' is also used to describe Burāq.[93] These few mentions demonstrate that while paradise does exist for Nawā'ī, he has accorded it no importance in the economy of his accounts. As for the houris, here they are more similar to the celestial souls of Sufi allegorical interpretation than to the voluptuous women depicted in the 1436 *Mirājnāma*.[94] Nawā'ī aligns himself with the current of mystical interpretation according to which supreme happiness does not consist of tasting the sensual pleasures available in paradise, but rather of approaching an experience that culminates in fusion with God. In the light of this, if the poet does not give many details of paradise this is because mystics had an increasing tendency to consider paradise and its pleasures as distractions that would distance them from God.[95] What's more, mystics refused to venerate God in the mere hope of thus acceding to Heaven. Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, for example, affirmed that her adoration of God was never motivated by fear of Hell or desire for paradise.[96] The desire for spiritual union with the well-beloved is stronger than conventional aspirations, and it abolishes notional opposites such as Heaven and Hell.[97] In his *Maḥbūb al-qulūb* (The Beloved of Hearts), a prose work written fifteen years after the *miʿrājiyya*s, Nawā'ī was to write that if a believer managed to free himself from all that was not God, then the pleasures of paradise would have as little effect on him as the torments of Hell.[98]

We have observed that, whether from the point of view of the uses of the marvellous or from that of conceptions of the after-life, the accounts of Nawā'ī are the opposite of those of the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma*. This is also true of their approaches to the encounter with God. In the *Miʿrājnāma* a genuine dialogue occurs, during which the Prophet negotiates the number of daily prayers to be performed by believers. God's words are even reported in the direct style. In Nawā'ī's poems there are no re-transcriptions of the words exchanged

91 MS Michigan 450, 16.

92 MS Michigan 450, 353.

93 MS Michigan 450, 263.

94 Although the Qur'ān does feature concrete mentions of paradise, it does not give many details of the creatures that inhabit it (see, for example, 3:136; 56:12–26). The theological literature on houris is in fact the product of a prolific classical exegesis, essentially founded on the historical data in certain *ḥadīth*s; these contain abundant descriptions of the garden, its residents, and their pleasures. (Berthels, "Die paradiesischen Jungfrau (Ḥûrîs) im Islam" 263–287; Al-Azmeh, "Rhetoric for the Senses", 165–82).

95 Föllmer, "Beyond Paradise" 592; Vakily, "Some notes on Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī", 407–417.

96 Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 30.

97 Föllmer, "Beyond Paradise", 593.

98 Nawā'ī, *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*, 88.

between the Prophet and his Creator. Nawā'ī's accounts are aligned with the classical Sufi interpretation of the encounter, in which this moment is strictly ineffable.[99] One of Nawā'ī's contemporaries and models, Jāmī, writes in his *Yūsuf u Zulaykhā* about the impossibility of transcribing the meeting between the Prophet and God in the form of dialogue:

> There he heard that which utterance cannot express in sounds
> There were only pure ideas and accumulated mysteries[100]

Words are powerless to report on this communion that was born of two desires: that of the Prophet to see God, and that of He who is beyond need, but who needs His beloved companion. In the *miʿrājiyya*s of the mystical poets, God is presented as the Sufi lover who wishes to enter into a profound communion with the beloved.[101] The traditional roles are reversed: the beloved (*maʿshūq*) becomes the lover (*ʿāshiq*), and the lover the beloved. This transformation indicates the central importance of love in the ascension of Muḥammad.

These marked differences: in the uses of the marvellous; in the roles of Heaven and Hell; and in the descriptions of the interview with God, reveal that these two types of text were intended to fulfil different, and divergent, functions. The first of them reflects a literalist vision of religion. Presenting itself as a guide for the salvation of souls, it tells the reader what to do during earthly life in order to avoid the torments of Hell. The *miʿrājiyya*s, on the other hand, invite one to consider earthly conduct as being, above all, a mystical experience. The text of the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* is presented in a style of discourse that resembles catechesis and the sermon (and preachers were very important figures in Herat[102]). This approach recalls the way in which predicators borrowed from the traditional literature of the *ḥadīth*s to feed the mass imagination with notions drawing on the realm of the wondrous, offering detailed descriptions of the pleasures of paradise and the pains of Hell. This incorporation of the wondrous not only gives spice to a lesson on the salvation of souls, it weakens the intellectual resistance of its audience, particularly when it elicits fear by depicting the terrors of Hell. There is a marked contrast with the poems of Nawā'ī, concerned as they are with mystical intimacy rather than religious legalism, and providing as they do a completely different form of example.

99 Böwering, "From the Word of God to the Vision of God" 213.

100 Jāmī, *Mathnawī-yi Haft awrang*, 576.

101 The first verse of Sura 17 of the Qur'ān describes God as having caused the ascension of the Prophet.

102 Paul, "The Khwājagān at Herat during Shāhrukh's Reign" 243.

When these two texts are compared and confronted, we see that they offer differing visions of the Prophet, who now embodies two different models.

2.2 *One Prophet, Two Models*

'You have a fine example in the Prophet of God', reveals Sura 33 of the Qurʾān. An examination of the model offered by the Prophet's behaviour in these accounts of his ascension is all the more legitimate in that the episode of the *miʿrāj* appears as an initiatic experience that makes the Prophet at once an extraordinary man and an ideal upon whom one should model oneself.[103]

In all of the accounts the ascension consecrates the Prophet, but the way in which this happens is not the same in different types of text. The 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* establishes Muḥammad's superiority over the other prophets. This is why, after having met Abraham, Moses and Jesus in Jerusalem, Muḥammad is invited by Abraham to lead them in prayer in front of a ladder, set up to facilitate his ascension. His consecration is then confirmed by the reactions of the prophets that he encounters during his journey from the first to the seventh celestial sphere. The author makes a point of underlining the superiority of Muḥammad to Moses, making use of the well-known episode during which the Hebrew prophet weeps on realising that the Muslim elect outnumber his own people.[104]

This element of apologetics is absent from Nawāʾī's text. Other prophets are not mentioned in his *miʿrājiyya*s, except by allusion. For example, the poet writes in the *Sadd-i iskandarī* that when the Prophet meets the constellation Aries, this ram senses great goodwill and declares that he no longer needs a shepherd such as Moses.[105] It's true that the superiority of Muḥammad over other prophets is occasionally evoked at the beginning of the account, but we never see them performing an act of allegiance as they do in the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma*. For Nawāʾī, as for his Persian predecessors, the important thing is the power of the Prophet over the entire cosmos. When he ascends into the heavens he is ceaselessly exalted by the celestial creatures he meets. He bestows his own radiance on the stars, and the planets he meets prostrate themselves before him. In every way, his journey through the universe of heavenly entities has the impact of a genuine cataclysm.

103 There is nothing in the Qurʾān that would permit the attribution to Muḥammad of particular gifts or supernatural qualities (cf. 18:110). It is his ascension that confers upon him some divine characteristics, and this, for simple believers, made of him the guarantee of ultimate truths and the mediator of salvation.

104 *Miʿrājnāma*, MS Paris, BN, Suppl. turc 190, fol. 24 and 26.

105 MS Michigan 450, 354.

Thus, there are different approaches to celestial topographies, and to the heavenly bodies' attitudes to the Prophet, in the economies of the different accounts. If both types of text affirm the unique position of Muḥammad among all creatures, his impact upon them is not the same in the different versions. In this respect, in the *Miʿrājnāma* the Prophet appears more like a spectator of the spheres that mark the progress of his ascension. For example, verbs of vision predominate and recur (*kördüm*, 'I saw') making Muḥammad's eyes the lenses through which the reader of the 1436 text participates in this guided tour of the beyond. In Nawāʾī's *miʿrājiyya*s, the Prophet appears more like a conqueror who masters the constellations and plants 'his banner' (*ʿalam*) at the summit of the divine throne, and then returns like the leader of a conquering army.[106]

What's more, the attitude of the Prophet is not identical across the two versions, and neither is the example he is setting for readers to follow. In the *Miʿrājnāma* the Prophet's outlook is that of any human being faced with such marvels as are presented to him. He is wonderstruck or frightened according to what he sees. He appears to conclude, like Gabriel, that anyone who hears the description of paradise will not rest until it has been attained, and that Hell is indescribable because of the extent and variety of its torments.[107] He responds as any believer might, and this identification is reinforced by the fact that the account is narrated in the first person, in accordance with the traditions of *ḥadīth* literature and the apocalyptic genre. Here the believer is invited to reproduce the reactions of the Prophet, and to feel the same emotions, as the text underlines:

> The Prophet, salvation be upon him, says: 'Oh people of my community, weep ceaselessly because of the terror that hell inspires in you, and perform those deeds that will ensure your place in the next world; for the torments of hell are truly terrible!'[108]

This inward focus allows the reader to enter the beyond through the eyes of the Prophet. When this vicarious experience approaches the point at which he will stop seeing the world through this prism, because the account is coming to an end, he is exhorted not to leave this identification with the Prophet behind completely. If the reader wants to avoid the tortures of Hell, he must imitate the Prophet's conduct as much as possible. God Himself expresses it thus:

106 MS Michigan 450, pp. 537–538.
107 *Miʿrājnāma*, MS Paris, BN, Suppl. turc 190, fol. 44 v.
108 *Miʿrājnāma*, MS Paris, BN, Suppl. turc 190, fol. 67 r.

> O Muḥammad, now that you have seen my powers, go and report this to your community. Promise paradise to believers, and warn infidels, hypocrites and wrong-doers by awakening their fears of the torments of hell.[109]

In the moral of the final episode, in which Muḥammad has visited Mount Qāf and converted the followers of Moses, the Prophet describes what it means to follow his path:

> Live at all times in fear of God the most high; do not allow your hearts to swell with pride; submit to the law.[110]

It is significant that the text ends with these lines. The term used for 'law' (*parmān/farmān*) does not belong to a specifically religious vocabulary; the injunction could thus also be interpreted as a reminder of the duty of obedience to the temporal law of the prince.

In Nawā'ī's *mi'rājiyya*s, the account of the ascension presents the Prophet as the archetype of the seeker after God. This is an initiatic voyage that will bring about profound changes in the one who undertakes it. It is for this reason that the poet emphasises the transformations that Muḥammad undergoes during the ascension; nothing is written on this subject in the prose version of 1436. The marvellous voyage here becomes an allegory of the mystical path, on which the traveller progressively renounces all his worldly riches while approaching his ultimate goal.[111] In this case, conforming to the Prophet's example means experiencing the highest form of love. In his *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*, written a few years later, Nawā'ī would describe the form of union so perfectly exemplified and illustrated in the *mi'rāj*, and ascribe it also to the 'truthful people' (*ṣiddīqlar*), among whom one finds the most noble form of love. According to Nawā'ī, they are called 'those who have obtained the desired union by love'.[112]

The accounts of *mi'rāj* in the prologues of the five *mathnawī*s thus present examples to be followed for the ascension of the soul. In an allegorical way they show the path that the heroes introduced in the *mathnawī*s (notably kings, including Bahrām Gūr in *Sab'a-yi sayyār* and Alexander the Great in *Sadd-i iskandarī*) will have to take in order to attain the perfection appropriate to their regal position. The celestial ascension of the Prophet holds up a mirror

109 *Mi'rājnāma*, MS Paris, BN, Suppl. turc 190, fol. 67v.

110 *Mi'rājnāma*, MS Paris, BN, Suppl. turc 190, fol. 68r.

111 Thibon, "L'amour mystique (*maḥabba*) dans la voie spirituelle chez les premiers soufis" 647.

112 Nawā'ī, *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*, 98.

to the Timurid Sultan to whom these accounts are dedicated, and invites him to conform to this spiritual model. 'You, too, must know how to benefit from this union' (*bol sen daghī waṣldin barumand*), says the court poet in one of his *miʿrajiyya*s.[113] One is tempted to consider the argument that Gabriel puts to Muḥammad, when he visits to persuade him to undertake the *miʿrāj*, as a message from the Naqshbandi poet himself, addressed to his sovereign. Unlike the Prophet in the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma*, who calls on his readers to fear all that they have glimpsed through his eyes, and to submit 'to the prescriptions of the law' in order to ensure salvation for their souls, the *miʿrājiyya*s' Prophet, on his celestial travels, invites readers to a radical conversion that will transform the person experiencing it as much as it shakes up the cosmic order of things.

3 Conclusion

What is the historical significance of this opposition that divides the 1436 account from the poems composed in 1480? These texts written for sovereigns and their entourage were created in two very distinct periods for the empire. The composition of the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma* should be related to the religious policies of Shāhrukh (r. 1405–47). This son and heir of the conqueror wanted to project the image of a great Islamic sovereign (*padishāh-i islām*) and renewer of religion (*mujaddid*), as described by Jalāl al-Dīn Qāyinī (d. 1434 or 1435) in his *Naṣā'iḥ al-Shāhrukhī*.[114] For this reason, Shāhrukh banned prostitution, games of chance and the consumption of alcohol. With the aim of reviving the traditions of the Prophet, this Timurid Sultan became an avid patron of the science of *ḥadīth*s, of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and of Qur'ānic exegesis – all disciplines that were taught in the madrasas that he established in Herat.[115] It is therefore unsurprising that many of these ideas that preoccupied the Sultan can be found in the *Miʿrājnāma* that appears to have been written on his orders. We know that the ruler had a particular affection for the work by Qāyinī mentioned above, which included (as Christiane Gruber rightly reminds us) an entire section on the punishments for infidels, apostates and heretics.[116] The text of the *Miʿrājnāma* may well have been used in the court of Shāhrukh to promote a legalistic view of religion among the Timurid elite. His death in 1447

113 MS Michigan 450, 263.

114 Subtelny and Khalidov, "The Curriculum of Islamic Higher Learning in Timurid Iran in the Light of the Sunnī Revival under Shah-Rukh" 212.

115 *Ibid.*

116 Gruber, *The Timurid 'Book of Ascension'* (Miʿrājnāma), 262.

changed the situation. The rise to power of his successor, Abū Saʿīd Mīrzā, who took control of the empire with the support of the great Naqshbandi shaykh Khwāja ʿUbaydullah Aḥrār, brought with it an increasing Sufi influence on government.[117] Thus the reign, beginning in 1467, of the last great Timurid sultan, Sulṭān Ḥusayn Mīrzā Bayqara, was also marked by the growing power of the Naqshbandiyya. Thanks to his unique position at court, Nawāʾī, who was initiated into that order by the poet Jāmī, was able to communicate the aspirations of its representatives. The correspondence the poet maintained with Khwāja Aḥrār (who was then in Samarkand) and with Jāmī reveals concrete details of their intention to use his proximity to Sulṭān Ḥusayn to influence decision-making in favour of the interests and principles of the brotherhood.[118] The composition of his *miʿrājiyya*s makes up a part of the activities of a Sufi poet who did not hesitate to take advantage of his respected position at court in order to become the prince's counsellor at a time when mysticism was penetrating an increasing number of artistic domains (architecture, miniatures, literature) in the Timurid capital.[119]

Is this to say that the growing importance of mysticism at court had persuaded the Timurid elites to prefer the *miʿrājiyya* genre to the more legalistic texts, such as the 1436 *Miʿrājnāma*? Art history does indeed tell us that from the second half of the fifteenth century, images of the Prophet's ascension appear principally in poems of the type composed by Nawāʾī.[120] This seems to indicate that mystical incarnation takes the lead over eschatological guidance, and in this sense, taste follows the evolution of the empire. In the web of relationships that are woven between the prince and the account of ascension we observe a reversal in the role played by the tale: having begun as an instrument of state control, it becomes an invitation to a radical conversion of the person of the prince. Because of this, it is not surprising that from the first type of text examined to the second we should witness the development of a radically different vision of the events described, and that from the same figure, that of the Prophet, two models should arise that are different and, in many ways, even antagonistic.

117 Paul, "The Rise of the Khwajagan-Naqshbandiyya Sufi Order in Timurid Herat", 71–86.

118 Toutant, "La réponse du poète chaghatay Nawāʾī au poète persan Niẓāmī".

119 Toutant, *Un empire de mots*, 623–635.

120 Gruber, "L'ascension (*Miʿrāj*) du prophète Mohammad dans la peinture et la littérature islamiques", 71.

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The Presence of the Prophet in Early Modern and Contemporary Islam

Volume 1. The Prophet Between Doctrine, Literature and Arts: Historical Legacies and Their Unfolding

Edited by

Denis Gril
Stefan Reichmuth
Dilek Sarmis

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